



AMAZING STORY

How Toronto became
a world centre for
computer graphics

Computer generated knight appears in the state-of-the-art opening graphics of television's *Amazing Stories* series.

By Rob Salem Toronto Star

When you think of computer graphics, you tend to think of Japan. Or California's Silicon Valley. Or George Lucas' Industrial Light & Magic special-effects factory near San Francisco. You do not think of Toronto. At least, not until now.

Last June, Toronto-based Omnibus Computer Graphics acquired the American graphics company, Digital Productions. Then, in September, Omnibus president J. C. Pennie announced a merger with another leading American firm, Robert Abel & Associates.

The end result: Omnibus is now the largest computer graphics company in North America.

"There are three separate facilities, but we consider it a company without walls," says California-based visual effects pioneer Robert Abel, in town recently to meet with advertisers. "Even though there is a physical distance between Los Angeles and Toronto, with today's modern technology you can simply send data back and forth, by transmission, by satellite, by telephone, over a number of different systems."

Revolutionary ads

The merger represents much more than just a lucrative business deal to Abel, whose award-winning work ranges from high-tech commercials — including the revolutionary 1970s ads he did for 7-Up and Levis — to movie special effects to television graphics such as the state-of-the-art opening sequence for *Amazing Stories*.

"You should look at this merger not so much in terms of the paper, or the fact that it's a publicly held company, all of which have great significance," he says. "But much more important to John Pennie and myself is becoming a force in the film business. What we want to do is to make films. And if you have a diversified, publicly held company that's as solid as Omnibus behind

you, the possibilities are endless."

As an example, he points to a daring new concept in children's entertainment that they're working on right now. "We will soon be in Saturday morning television," Abel says, "at least to an extent. But the interesting thing about it, without divulging exactly what it's about, is that not only will it be the first computer animation on Saturday morning, but it will also use an interactive video device."

Abel likes to compare the Omnibus approach to the old Hollywood studio system, where all the creative people, from costume designers to scriptwriters to cameramen, worked together on the same lot. "It's a tradition that goes back to my own roots," he says, "as a kid growing up in the shadow of the MGM lot in Culver City."

"In today's marketplace, merging the capabilities of all these special effects people, all these miniature people (model-builders), all these live-action people, all these computer graphics people, you suddenly find that you have the capability to do almost anything that you want — a feature, a television series, a world's fair project (a display at the Expo '86 California pavilion), in addition to the commercials."

"We have one of the finest live-action directors in the world working for us, John Badham. Here's a guy with an incredible string of hits — *Saturday Night Fever*, *Blue Thunder*, *WarGames*, *Short Circuit* — and he comes here, as he says, 'to work out my eye and work out my brain.' Six months or more between features, you get soft. Just like aerobics, you need a place to work out and to stay fit. And he says this is the greatest place on earth because it has the most toys and the most equipment."

"And there's another world-class director coming aboard soon. It's still a few weeks away from my being able to say who. But speaking as a film maker, which is really what I categorize myself as, the

idea of having all these tools accessible to you is very exciting. The bottom line, whether you're George Lucas or Steven Spielberg or Stanley Kubrick, is having the tools and the toys to be able to make the film."

The most expensive — and most vital — of these "toys" is the Cray computer, a \$12-million megabrain that Abel says is doing for computer graphics what the Gutenberg press did for the written word. "For a long time computer graphics was owned by technology," he explains. "Technical people, not artists, not film makers. Then along came the Cray, the supercomputer, and suddenly what used to take you 1,000 hours to do could be done in an hour. That's unbelievable."

Basic philosophy

"John (Pennie) has just made a deal with the University of Toronto for a Cray that matches exactly the one we've got in California. I think they were able to buy it for around \$8 million. And this year, because of the Cray, we'll probably be able to go from about \$4½ million in computer graphics work to about \$10 million, simply because we have the instruments to do it. Last year, without Digital and Omnibus as part of the team, we had to turn down almost \$3 million worth of work because we simply couldn't handle the workload on smaller computers."

However, Abel insists, all the high-priced hardware in the world is useless if you don't know how to apply it creatively. "I'm not a technologist," he says. "I'm an engineering school drop-out."

"I mean, if it's just technology, so what? Our basic philosophy is that technology is wonderful, but if you don't know how to apply it, then you don't belong in the film business. The key is in understanding how you take the technology and apply it to entertainment."